

CASE STUDY - JOE WRATTEN



Joe Wratten is part of the furniture at West Ham United. A season ticket holder, he first saw a game of football when he was two and even at this early age caught the bug. Now 17 he is known at Upton Park not just for his loyalty and passionate support but also his strength of character. He suffers from Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma, a type of cancer of the blood that affects the white blood cells, which are usually involved in protecting against infection. Joe has used a wheelchair since birth, struggles with constant breathing problems and is tube fed. As his Mum June says “he has a very sick body but a very active brain.”



His passion in life is football, and everything revolves around his beloved Hammers. Like most football mad young men his bedroom is covered with posters, flags and pictures. But it goes beyond that. Every conversation is about football, even with his teachers, as June explains. “His tutor at school is fortunately a West Ham fan. Every lesson Joe went to he somehow converted to football. If it was drama it was *“so we were at a match and this guy came up to me...”* or maths it was *“how many players in the team”* and so on.”

Over the years Joe has been to 18 grounds and although facilities for disabled fans have improved, it can still be a bit hit and miss. Because of his condition Joe needs two carers and occasionally (and worryingly) even this adjustment has caused problems, even at the biggest of Premiership clubs.

However Joe’s recent experience up at Middlesborough shows what can be done and what a positive impact a good experience at the football can have. After a long drive and a recent bad experience at another club, June was understandably apprehensive as to how the day would go. “We got to the ground and after parking really close the disability steward met us at the gate. We followed him through and he was brilliant. He took us down the player’s tunnel, we were with him on the side of the pitch during the warm up and he took some pictures for us with the players. Because the away section wasn’t full he asked us whether we’d prefer to sit behind the goal or elevated. We chose elevated and the view was great. He then sent someone to ask us if we wanted tea or coffee and he even gave me an extra jacket because someone thought I looked cold! Middlesborough’s hospitality was beyond anything Joe and I had ever experienced before. Joe was absolutely over the moon. He told me there was nothing that could have made the day better.”



The facilities at The Riverside are good but could still be improved. However this is a shining example of how a club and its staff's attitude towards disabled fans can make such a difference. Both West Ham and Middlesbrough have a dedicated Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) and it is no coincidence that Joe's experiences at both clubs have been so rewarding. NADS urges all clubs to listen to their supporters, listen to positive experiences like Joe's and understand their unique impact on the lives of their disabled fans. Improvements still need to be made.

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